

W. E. Kimsey
Commissioner

STATE OF OREGON
Bureau of Labor
Fair Employment Practices Division
Salem, Oregon

William S. Van Meter
Deputy Commissioner

The Occupational Status of the Negro Worker
In the Portland Area

By: E. Shelton Hill,
Industrial Secretary,
Portland Urban League

The Negro worker has been in the Portland area for more than seventy-five years. The United States census of 1870 records 346 Negroes in Oregon, the 1890 U. S. census reports 1886. ~~(The Smith report of 1938 states that practically all Oregon Negroes have always lived in Portland.)~~ During this period there was a movement of Negroes from the rural districts and small towns to the urban centers. In this shifting process, Portland, the largest city in Oregon, attracted the larger number. The specific factors in this growth of the Negro population in Portland may be summarized as follows:

1. Portland became a railroad and shipping terminal. Hence porters, dining car waiters, and snip attendants were recruited and took up residence here.
2. The laboring class of whites were so occupied fighting the Chinese, who had been brought in to build the railroads, that the Negro question was temporarily overlooked. During this period a number of Negroes Moved into the state.
3. Negroes who formed a section of the "underworld" were allowed to flourish without any interference, same as the major group, consequently their number increased rapidly.
4. Approximately seventy-five Negroes were brought from South Carolina and Georgia to Portland at one time by the manager of the Portland Hotel. Most of them sent for their families and took up permanent residence in the city.

All Negro workers were employed in service catagories. We have pointed out the increase in population from 1870 to 1890. We might also point out that for the next fifty years there was practically no increase, actually a substantial decrease when we take into consideration the normal birth rate. The 1940 census records 1937 Negroes in Portland.

To understand the Negro worker's present occupational status, we must know something of the social conaitions during the early period as related to

Negroes in Oregon. Oregon was long noted as an anti-Negro state. The desire to exclude all Negroes from the state is seen in the efforts of the Oregon state Constitutional Convention, which met August 18, 1857 at the Marion County Court-house, Salem, Oregon. When this act was passed regarding free Negroes and mulattoes, "No free Negro or Mulatto, not now residing in the state at the time of adoption of the constitution, shall come, reside or be within the state or hold any real estate, or make contracts, or maintain any suit therein; and the legislature shall provide by penal law for the removal by public officers all such Negroes and mulattoes and for their effectual exclusion from the state and for punishment of persons who shall bring them into the state or employ them."* (At the November 9, 1857 Territorial Election the vote was 8640 against, allowing free Negroes to come into the state - 1031 in favor of them coming in.) Section 6 of the act read: "That if any such free Negro or Mulatto shall fail to quit the county as required by this act, he or she may be arrested upon warrant issued by some Justice of the Peace, and, if guilty, upon trial before such Justice, shall receive upon his or her bare back not less than twenty nor more than thirty-nine stripes, to be inflicted by the constable of the proper county." Section 7 reads: "That if any free Negro or mulatto shall fail to quit the country within the term of six months after receiving such stripes, he or she shall again receive the same punishment every six months until he or she shall quit the country."

The Legislature of 1862 provided in the penal code for the removal of Negroes and mulattoes from the state, and for their effectual expulsion.**

An example of public opinion in Oregon was expressed by the newspaper Oregon Statesman, October 2, 1865: "We do not believe that any Democratic or Republican form of government can successfully govern two separate and distinct races of people in large numbers with equal political rights to both races."

When Negroes were finally permitted to live in the state each Negro in Portland had to pay a ten dollar head tax and had no civil rights whatever.***

This anti-Negro attitude was reflected in the period from 1920 to 1924, when the Ku Klux Klan was at its height in Oregon.

At the time Negro workers were permitted to be brought into the state by the railroads and hotels it was an unwritten agreement that no other employers would employ them. Several of the restaurants who employed Negro waiters later replaced them with Chinese. As a Negro worker became unemployed he usually left the city for Washington or California where attitudes were more favorable. There was practically no change in the occupational status of the Negro worker in Portland from 1890 to 1942. An industrial survey taken of Negro workers in 1941 shows Portland Negro workers employed as follows: 98.6% railroad industry in some capacity such as waiter, cooks, porters, redcaps and shop laborers; 1% in private industry and domestic service; and, .4% in business and professions. However during this period a number of Negro children of Portland parents graduated from these Oregon colleges: Oregon State, University of Oregon, Linfield, Pacific University, Eastern Oregon Teachers College, North Pacific Dental College and Western States College of Chiroprathy. All of these graduates had to leave

*Oregon State Constitutional Convention, August 8, 1857, Pg. 10

**C.H. Carey, "History of Oregon", Pg. 154

*** History of the Negro in Oregon - Sociology Dept., Linfield College.

Portland for employment due to the employment attitude. In 1942 came the great industrial migration. War workers were recruited for the shipyard industry in the Portland area. The Negro population increased to 25,000 by 1944. Because of the acute labor shortage, war pressure and war-time Fair Employment Practices Commission, Negroes were hired freely in all shipyards except the Albina Shipyard which was locally controlled. They were accepted in the training program for shipyard skills and admitted to unions covering shipyard crafts, except the Boilermakers' and Steamfitters' Unions.

During the war period a number of Negro Workers were employed in private industry holding war contracts. At the close of the shipyards, the Negro worker was faced with the old attitude of the employers, plus the fact that there was a surplus of white workers. By 1946 the Negro population dropped to 9500. However, there were now in the community several agencies interested in the Negro worker and seeking to improve race relations generally. Prominent among these were the Portland Urban League, the Office of Vocational Opportunity, the Committee on Inter-racial Principles, and Practices. Through the consolidated effort of these forces and other community factors plus the fact a number of Negro workers now had union affiliation, new employers began to employ new workers and experienced satisfactory results.

A large number of educated and highly skilled Negroes remained in the area and began to press for employment according to their skills. A strong campaign of public education was carried out. Conferences with employers and intensive counseling was done with the workers. The 1948 Annual Report of the Urban League of Portland reports more than 450 employers using Negro workers who had not employed them prior to 1945.

The 1949 session of the Oregon Legislature passed a fair employment practices law which made discrimination in employment illegal in the state. Now a substantial number of all Negro workers have union affiliation, working in all the building trades, dry cleaning industry (except laundry), foundries, textiles, construction, and building service. Negroes are employed on all levels of civil service, federal state and city - such as physicist, draftsman, stenographers, clerks, etc. In the professions, twelve Negro teachers are working in eleven of the grades schools in the city and one Negro instructor is employed by a college; two Negroes are on the hospital staffs as doctors; several Negro nurses, one in a supervisory capacity; several Negro social workers carrying unsegregated case loads; four Negro retail clerks in one of the major downtown department stores; a Negro cashier in a chain store; five Negro policemen employed by the city and assigned to districts according to need and not according to Negro residential area; three Negro deputy sheriffs employed by the county. There is a Negro member of the Multnomah Bar Association, and six Negro members of the Portland City Club.

The change in the Negro workers occupational status started in 1942, but the trend indicates that the progress will continue. This is indicated by the fact that in 1950, 50% of the Portland Negro high school graduates entered college as contrasted with a national average of 25% for all high school graduates.

As more Negro workers acquire skills and training and employers' attitude and public education improve so will the Portland Negro occupational status improve.

There are several Negro owned and operated businesses catering to the general public, such as grocery store, drug store, filling station, etc. These businesses will increase in number and variety as the college trained people return to their home community.

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